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Preventing Cancer with the HPV Vaccine: Easy as 1-2-3

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Cmdr. Dixie Aune

If you were told that there is an easy way to prevent cancer, would you take advantage of it?

With proper awareness and education, young active duty men and women should take advantage of the [cancer-preventing human papillomavirus \(HPV\) vaccine](#). The HPV vaccine, which is given in three separate injections over six months, helps protect against the infection that can cause genital warts and cervical, anal, penis, and throat cancers.



Lt. Cmdr. Kellye Hoffman

Currently, there are more than six million new HPV infections each year. Three out of four people will acquire this sexually transmitted infection at some point in their lives. While most infections typically go away on their own, some HPV strains can cause cancer. The HPV vaccine protects against the four most common HPV strains that cause 70 percent of all cervical cancers and 90 percent of all genital warts. These are pretty amazing statistics!

Surprisingly, even with this information, a large number of young adults are failing to receive all three doses of the vaccine. Without all three doses, the vaccine does not offer complete protection against HPV. In the United States, approximately 50 percent of the female population has received at least one dose, but we could do better. In some countries, the vaccination rate among females is over 80 percent, and they’re already seeing the benefits of herd immunity, meaning enough people are vaccinated to offer protection to those who aren’t.

Presently, there are two HPV vaccines available: Cervarix © and Gardasil ©. Cervarix © protects against 70 percent of cervical cancers and is only recommended for females, ages 11-26 years, and can be given as early as age nine. Gardasil © protects against 70 percent of cervical cancers and 90 percent of genital warts and is recommended for both males and

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females, ages 11-26 years, and can be given as early as age nine. Studies demonstrate that the HPV vaccine is extremely safe. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), the vaccine is even safe for breastfeeding women (it is currently not recommended for pregnant women simply because there isn't enough data to confirm its safety in this population; however, initial reports are reassuring).

Both vaccines are given in a series of three doses and the vaccines come with a handy reminder card to help patients remember to get their next doses, something I always recommend my patients to use.

It's important to stress that the vaccine is just as important for males as well as females. Not only will the vaccine help prevent certain cancers in men, vaccination of males prior to the onset of sexual activity will also help prevent them from transmitting the covered HPV types to their future sexual partners.

All three doses must be received for full protection against the HPV strains covered in the vaccines, and must be completed prior to the onset of sexual activity for complete protection. However, the vaccine is still beneficial to sexually active patients who will receive at least partial protection, which is better than none at all. Even women who have had an abnormal pap smear should get the vaccine because they will also receive partial protection. This is because the vaccine protects against more than one strain of HPV infection, and even though you may have been exposed to one, the vaccine still offers protection against the others.

One of the reasons it is so important for our active duty men and women to receive this vaccine is the potential impact HPV can have on operational readiness. In both men and women, an HPV infection can lead to cancer. In addition to the devastating personal consequences a cancer diagnosis can have on an individual, service members with cancer aren't deployable.

When a female has an abnormal [pap smear](#), she will require further medical evaluation. For active duty women, this could result in a delayed deployment, a postponed PCS move, or even a MEDEVAC if she is already underway or deployed. As a provider, I have seen many female service members unable to deploy or even delay ships' movements while they underwent further evaluation for an abnormal pap. The HPV vaccine could help prevent this because it decreases rates of abnormal pap smears and the need for colposcopies.

HPV infections continue to be a public health challenge to women and men. The cancers they can cause, especially cervical cancer in women, are life-threatening diseases, but with a simple vaccination given in three doses, they are ones that we can prevent. It really is as easy as 1-2-3!

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Click [here](#) to see a list of HPV prevention resources and more information about the vaccines mentioned above.

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